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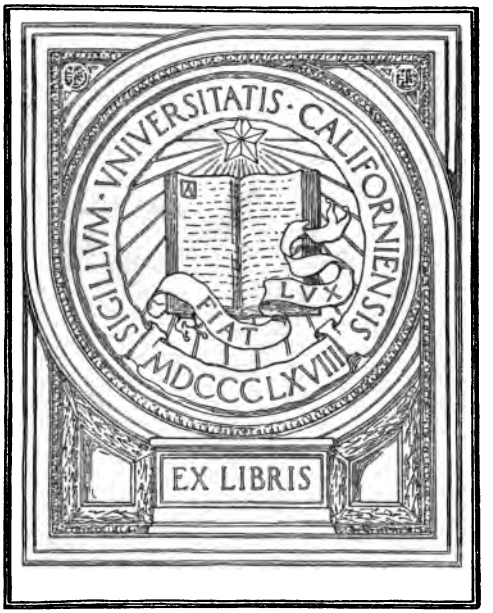
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2

Accept this belated
birthday remembrance —
a poem filled with
picturesque description —
from Della.

"I was takin' leave of Nancy,
Standin' out there in the night."

Nancy MacIntyre

A Tale of the Prairies

LESTER SHEPARD PARKER

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

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1911

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The Classical Literary Bureau, St. Louis, U. S. A

To My Wee Daughter

RACHEL ELLEN PARKER

this little story is

affectionately inscribed

912919

THE SECOND EDITION

To an appreciative public the second edition of *Nancy MacIntyre* is due. The author feels deeply grateful for the many unsolicited and highly commendatory reviews given this simple love story. *Nancy MacIntyre* has been received by the American people in a way that forces the conviction upon the author that this labor of love is not wholly without merit.

THE THIRD EDITION

It was not the prudence of man's mellow age, nor the wisdom of woman's intuition, but the rashness of an author that prompted the first edition of "Nancy MacIntyre."

And, now, how can he thank an approving public for thinking so well of this little volume that the third edition has become necessary? The reader has somehow fathomed this little heart to heart story—has guessed the truth—"Nancy," and "Billy," are not wholly creatures of the imagination. In her youth, not so very long ago, it could be said of "Nancy," that:

"Nature was so lavish of her store
That she bestowed until she had no more."

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BILLY'S REVERY

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1

No use talking, it's perplexing,
  Everything don't look the same;
Never had these curious feelin's
  Till those MacIntyres came.
Quit my plowing long 'fore dinner,
  Didn't hitch my team again;
Spent the day with these new neighbors,
  Getting 'quainted with the men.
Talk about the prairie roses!
  Purtiest flow'rs in all the worl',
But they look like weeds for beauty
  When I think of that new girl.
Strange, she seems so kind of friendly
  When I'm awkward, every way,
And my tongue gets hitched and hobbled,
  Everything I try to say!

2

There's one person, that Jim Johnson,
  That there man I can't abide;
He's been milling 'round near Nancy,—
  Durn his dirty, yaller hide!
Never really liked that Johnson;
  Now, each time I hear his name,
Feel this state's too thickly settled,—
  That is, since that new girl came.

If this making love to women
Went like breaking in a horse,
I might stand some show of winning,
'Cause I've learned that game, of course;
But this moonshine folks call 'courting,'
I ain't never played that part;
I can't keep from talking foolish
When I'm thinking with my heart.

3

Now, those women that you read of
In these story picture books,
They can't ride in roping distance
Of that girl in style and looks.
They have waists more like an insect,
Corset shaped and double cinched;
Feet just right to make a watch charm,
Small, of course, because they're pinched.
This here Nancy's like God made her,—
She don't wear no saddle girth,
But she's supple as a willow,
And the purtiest thing on earth.
I'm in earnest; let me ask you —
'Cause I want to reason fair —
What durn business has that rope-necked
Johnson sneaking over there?

4

Hands so soft and strong and tender,
  When I shook a "how de do,"
They was loaded sure with something
  Seemed to thrill me through and through;
Hair as black as fire-burnt prairie;
  Eyes that dance and flash and flirt;
Every time she smiled she showed you
  Teeth as white's my Sunday shirt.
Baked us biscuits light as cotton;
  I can't eat mine any more,—
I must get some better breeches,—
  Kind o' 'shamed of those I wore;
But I'm goin' there to-morrow,
  Like enough I'll stay all day,
Seems to me too dry for plowing —
  Durn that Johnson, anyway!

5

I ain't much on deep-down thinkin',
  Reasoning out the way things go,
So I s'pose I'll keep on foolin'
  Till in time I get to know.
I've had chills and fever 'n' ague;
  Suffered till their course was run.
Maybe love just keeps on runnin',
  Till a man has lost — or won.

One thing certain: I have got it;
  Seems to struck in good and hard.
Makes me sometimes soft and tender;
  Next thing I would fight my pard.
Appetite is surely failing,
  Sometimes I don't eat a bite;
Dream of Nancy all the daytime,
  That durn Johnson, half the night.

6

I've just got to get to plowin',
  Break a fire-guard 'round my shack,
Plant my sod corn, fix my garden;
  Everything is goin' to rack.
I can't work the way I used to;
  Got to quittin' early now,
Since a little thing that happened,
  I can't just remember how.
I was takin' leave of Nancy,
  Standin' out there in the night,
And I put my arms around her —
  Heart stopped beatin', just from fright.
Can't express the kind of feelin',—
  Words wa'n't never made for this,—
As I drew her face up closer,
  And I stole my first sweet kiss.

THE QUARREL

1

Things have moved along some smoother
  Since a week ago to-night,
Seems my blood turned all to p'ison —
  Me and Johnson had a fight.
Caught him twice up there to Nancy's;
  Told him plain to stay away;
But he didn't seem to notice
  Anything I had to say.
Caught him settin' there and talkin'
  'Bout the things that he had done —
Durndest liar on the prairie —
  Laughing like he thought 'twas fun,
Settin' there beside o' Nancy —
  Settin' down is all he does,
Good for nothin', bug-eyed, loafin',
  Wrinkled, yaller, meddlin' cuss!

2

I just let him keep on settin'
  All the whole long evenin' through;
When he started off I follered,
  Told him what I meant to do.
"Why," says he, "now, don't git foolish;
  I ain't skeered o' your light breeze;
I'll go thar and set by Nancy,
  Spite o' you, when I durn please."

Well, I don't just clear remember
  All the doin's that took place,
But you'll know the story better
  If you'll look at Johnson's face.
As we rode we clinched and wrestled;
  Then we tumbled to the ground,
Tore the bunch grass up, and cactus,
  For a hundred yards around.

3

Got him down, and in the scrimmage
  Felt my lasso on the ground,
Tied his legs and bent him over,
  Bound him like he's sittin' down;
Hustled quick to mount my pony,
  Threw the loose end round the horn,
Thought I'd learn that Mr. Johnson
  He'd missed out in bein' born.
Then I dragged him on the prairie,
  Through a Turk's Head cactus bed,
Prickly pears and shoestring bushes,—
  'Twasn't decent what he said.
He's so dev'lish fond of settin',
  Thought I'd fix his settin' end
So's he'd be more kinder careful
  Settin' by that girl again.

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"Then I dragged him on the prairie
Through a Turk's Head cactus bed."

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THE DISAPPOINTMENT

I

There's a feeling in my bosom,
  Like a hound that's lost the game,
After chasing over bunch grass
  Till his feet are sore and lame.
I am standing by her dug-out,
  Open hangs the sagging door;
Every grass blade speaks of Nancy,
  But she's gone, to come no more.
For her father and her mother,
  And her brothers, late last night,
Loaded up their prairie schooner,
  And vamoosed the ranch, 'fore light.
'Taint no use to stand here cussin',
  But my heart slumps down like lead
When I think of losing Nancy
  And to know my dreams are dead.

2

It was here I held you, Nancy,
  When I showed you all my heart;
When I told you I would always
  Be your friend and take your part.
Oh, I thought that in life's lottery
  I had drawn the biggest prize,
When I kissed you there that evening
  And looked down into your eyes;

For I never had such feelin's
  Fill my hide clean through and through—
Such a hungry, starving longing
  To be always close to you.
But you've gone with all your family,
  And I'm left to mourn my loss,
While the posse hunts your daddie,
  'Cause he stole Bill Kelly's hoss.

3

Now I don't know where you're roaming,
  And I don't know where'll you'll land;
But I wish you knew my feelin's,
  And 'twas clear just how I stand:
How the good Lord, high in heaven,
  Put a throbbing heart in here,
But it starts to pumping backwards
  When it feels that you don't keer
For a roving old jay-hawker,
  Never caught like this before,
And who'd give his last possession
  For a glimpse of you once more.
If we lose your old fool father,
  Folks 'round here can stand the loss,
He was raised in old Missoura,
  Or he'd never stole that hoss.

"I am standing by her dug-out,
Open hangs the sagging door."

4

When my mind gets to recalling
  All the happy times we had,
Good red liquor and tobacco
  Gets to tasting kind o' bad.
You remember on your birthday
  How I drove 'round kind o' late,
And we went to Donkey Collins'
  To a dance, to celebrate?
When you got up in my wagon,
  Bless my heart, you sure was sweet!
You was bound that you'd go barefoot,
  'Cause your new shoes hurt your feet.
Well, I tell you, pretty Nancy,
  Every minute of that ride
Seemed like floating through the heavens,
  'Cause you set there by my side.

5

When we pulled up at old Collins',
  Quite a bunch was there before,
We could hear the fiddler calling,
  And the scraping on the floor.
Through the dingy sodhouse window
  Gleamed a sickly yellow light
Where I helped you from the wagon,
  Holding you so loving tight.

All the night he keeps his saddle,
  Urging Zeb and Simon on,
Till the trail clears up before him
  In the gray of early dawn.
Here he turns towards the river,
  Arched above with vine-growth rank,
And dismounting ties his horses
  Near the steep and treacherous bank.

3

More than light and shade and landscape
  Meet the plainsman's searching look,
For the paths that lie before him
  Are the pages of his book.
Stooping down and reading slowly,
  Noting every trace around,
Of the travel gone before him,
  Every mark upon the ground,
Down the winding, deep-cut roadway
  Furrowed out by grinding tire,
Where the ruts lead to the water,
  In the half-dried plastic mire,
He beholds the telltale marking
  Of an odd-shaped band of steel,
Welded on to hold the fellies
  Of old MacIntyre's wheel.

4

High above, the wind is moaning
  In a lonely, fretful mood,
Through the lofty spreading branches
  Of the elm and cottonwood.
Where the willows hide the fordway
  With their fringe of lighter green,
Lies the dam, decayed and broken,
  Where the beavers once were seen.
On the sycamore bent o'er it,
  With its gleaming trunk of white,
Sits the barred owl, idly blinking
  At the early morning light,
While, within its spacious hollow,
  Where the rotting heart had clung
Till removed by age and fire,
  Sleeps the wild cat with her young.

5

Plunging through the sluggish water,
  Scarcely halting for a drink,
Toiling through the sticky quagmire,
  They attain the farther brink.
Here the trail leads to the westward,—
  Once the red man's wild domain;
Now the shallow rutted highway
  Of the settler's wagon train.

Here and there along the edges,
  Paths run through the waving grass,
Where at night from bluff to river,
  Prowling coyotes find a pass.
Here the meadow lark sings gaily
  As she leaves her hidden nest,
While the sun of early morning
  Double-tints her orange breast.

6

Up this broad and fertile valley,
  Tracing all its winding ways,
Plodding on with dogged patience
  Through a score of weary days,
Camping in the lonely timber,
  Sleeping on the scorching plain,
Bearing heat and thirst and hunger,
  Sore fatigue and wind and rain —
Halting only when the telltale
  Mark was missing in the track;
Only when he called a greeting,
  As he passed some settler's shack;
Till the valley and its timber
  Vanished, where the rolling sward
Of the westward-sweeping prairie
  Marked the trail 'cross Mingo's ford.

7

Here for hours he searched the crossing
  And the wheel-ruts leading on
To the north, a full day's journey,
  But the guiding mark was gone; —
Not a vestige here remaining
  Of the sign that could be told,
For old Mac had traveled swiftly
  And the trail was mixed and old.
Two whole days Bill searched and waited,
  Hoping for some other clew,
Weighing questions of direction,
  Undecided what to do.
Till, one night, while cooking supper
  By the camp-fire's genial glow,
He was startled by a stranger's
  Sudden presence and "Hello!"

8

Tall of stature, dark of visage,
  By the wind well dried and tanned,
Clad in "shaps" and spurs that jingled,
  With a bull whip in his hand.
Close behind him in the shadows,
  Eyes aglow with red and green,
Stood a blazed-face Texas pony,
  Ewe-necked, cat-hammed, wild, and mean.

"Hello, stranger! glad to see you,
  Got my cattle fixed for night;
Just got through, and riding round 'em,
  'Cross the bluff, I saw your light.
No, thanks, pardner, had my supper;
  Seems your fire is short o' wood;
I just thought I'd see who's camped here —
  Gee! that bacon does smell good!"

9

When the frugal meal was over,
  When the pipes were filled and lit,
And the cowboy ceased his stories
  Weak in moral, rank in wit,
Billy plied him long with questions,
  Wording each with thought and care,
Lest his zeal for information
  Should reveal his mission there.
"Tell me who you've seen go by here,
  Just within the last few days;
What they had for teams and outfits;
  How the country round here lays.
Have you seen a prairie schooner —
  Old style freighter — pass this way?
Both wheel hosses white-nosed sorrels,
  Lead team of a dun and gray?"

"He was startled by a stranger's Sudden presence and 'Hello!'"

10

"I remember some such outfit,
  If I've got your idee right.
Think they camped a mile below here
  Week ago last Thursday night.
Pulled in sometime 'long 'bout sundown,
  Turned their stock in yonder draw,
But an oldish sort of fellow
  Was the only one I saw;
Rode a speckled chestnut pony
  With a white star in his face;
Asked some questions 'bout the country,
  'Bout the proper crossing-place.
Pulled out sometime long 'fore daylight.
  Didn't see them when they passed,
But from all the indications
  They was trav'ling pretty fast.

11

"Crossed right here where we are settin',
  Saw their trail that very day;
Struck plumb north, and by my reck'nin'
  Towards the north they'll likely stay.
North of here, by my experience,
  He'll find grass that's mighty fine.
Chances are that he'll keep goin'
  Till he strikes Nebraska's line.

It was just the next day after
  That my cattle scattered so;
Some strayed off 'way south to Jimson's,
  One bunch in the bend below.
That's the day I met that feller
  (Eyes so black he couldn't see)
Who kept pumpin' me with questions
  Like you've just been askin' me.

12

"Asked about that prairie schooner,
  Said that they was friends of hisn,
Like to wore me plumb to frazzles
  With his everlasting quiz'n.
Rode a piebald, knock-kneed broncho;
  Coat was battered, ripped, and torn;
He was yaller, long, and g'anted
  Like a steer with holler horn.
An' you oughter seen his breeches!
  He must sure be shy on sense;
Why, they looked like he'd been riding
  On a bucking barb wire fence.
You won't meet him, 'cause I saw him
  Coming back across this way,
Going eastward where he come from;
  Took the back trail yesterday.

13

"Said he'd found the old man's outfit
  Moving westward on North Fork.
Can't remember all he told me,
  For he runs a heap to talk.
Said he'd found out what he wanted;
  Said he 'had a plan or two,
And the folks that knowed Jim Johnson,
  Knowed that he would put 'em through.'
Then there's others took the west trail;
  They go that way huntin' range —
Funny how folks when they come here
  Get to itchin' for a change!
I've been stayin' too confinin';
  Never left this herd but once.
I'm the oldest puncher round here,—
  Been here over fourteen months."

14

Long before the sun had risen,
  While the night mist's ghostly veil
Hid from view the sloughs and hollows,
  Billy took the northern trail.
Through the sunflowers in the low land,
  Toiling over sandstone knolls,
Winding through the level stretches
  Dotted thick with treacherous holes

Where the prairie dogs sat chattering,
  Bolt upright upon their mounds,
While the ground owls sought their burrows,
  Startled by the warning sounds;
Stumbling into buffalo wallows,
  Dug out in an earlier day
By the halting herds that rested,
  Rolled and bellowed in their play.

15

Now and then the sheltered hillside
  Waved its varicolored flowers
As a greeting to the traveler,
  Solace to the toilsome hours.
Old Jack Rabbit hopped before him,
  Then sat up, to watch him pass,
Dusky horned-toads scurried nimbly
  Through the withered buffalo grass.
Here and there the buzzing rattler
  Whirred a warning, head alert,
Then retreated from the snapping,
  Stinging strokes of Billy's quirt.
Day by day the wild breeze flying,
  With'ring in its scorching heat,
Hummed a tune to labored beating
  Of the plodding horses' feet.

16

Day by day this panorama
  Passing slowly, dully by,
With the sun's brass disc high gleaming
  From a white and cloudless sky,
Sometimes drew fantastic pictures,
  Many a strange and gruesome sign —
Phantom trees and fairy castles —
  Blurred the far horizon line.
Then they'd vanish like the fancies
  Of a fever-smitten brain,
And returning, changed in outline,
  Elsewhere on the mighty plain
Would allure the eyesore traveler
  Till the very sky above
Seemed to mock with vague mirages
  Every surety of love.

17

When each weary day was over,
  Halting near some watering-place,
Bill unpacked his meager outfit,
  Turned the horses loose to graze,
Baked his varicolored dough-bread,
  On a fire of cattle chips;
Coffee made of green-scummed water,
  Nectar to his thirsty lips.

On the ground he spread his blanket
  And reclining there alone,
Heard the swiftly sweeping breezes
  Sing in dreary monotone
Strange wild anthems, weird and lonesome,
  Like lost spirits floating by,
While afar in broken measure
  Swelled the coyotes' yelping cry.

18

All the varied information
  Gathered from the few he passed —
Some from herders, some from stragglers —
  Gave the missing clew at last
As to where old Mac was heading;
  For that telltale band of steel
Stamped along the endless roadway
  Printed by the turning wheel,
Pressed its image on the memory
  Of the settlers coming back,
Who, when questioned by the searcher,
  Told him that the telltale track
Had begun to veer to westward
  After crossing by the way
Leading up the North Platte River,
  Where the sand wastes stretch away.

19

As he crossed this barren prairie's
  Sweeping waste of poverty,
Billy paused beside the cripple
  Of a wind-torn twisted tree,
Standing there, marooned forever,
  Where its hapless seed had blown,
Miles on miles from forest neighbor,
  Struggling out its life alone.
Here he stopped, with head uncovered,
  Conscious of a strange appeal,
Yielding to the voiceless longing
  Human hearts are bound to feel
When their lot is isolation,
  And a field of sterile soil
Dwarfs and twists the struggling spirit
  As the body bends with toil.

20

Here that subtle, silent craving,
  Which with life will never end,
Of the lonesome and the needy
  For the comfort of a friend,
Drew the traveler to this tree waif,
  And he spread his outfit near,
While they held that sacred converse
  Which the soul alone can hear.

While the horses browsed the sage brush,
  And the sun withdrew his light,
And the moon in mournful splendor
  Ushered in the lonely night,
He lay down beneath the branches,
  Wrapped in musings strange and deep —
Thoughts that bore him off in silence
  O'er the placid sea of sleep.

21

In his dreams he saw a monarch
  Decked in sumptuous array,
Seated on a throne of glory
  Bearing royal title, Day.
Then some mighty power transcendent,
  Thrust him from his gorgeous throne,
Turning all the realm to darkness,
  And the world was left alone.
As the shades of gloom were spreading,
  By strange flashing threads of light
He beheld in dim-drawn outline,
  On the background of the night,
Phantom horse and girlish rider,
  Speeding on in reckless race,
Till she turned directly toward him
  And he saw Her fearless face!

" Faithful Simon, weak and starving,
Groaned and fell beneath his pack. . ."

22

With the journey's slow progression
  Slipped away the summer days,
Merging with the sleepy beauty
  Of the lazy autumn haze;
Then the frosts and drought combining
  Waged relentless battle there,
Withering up the scanty ranges,
  Leaving all the country bare.
When he entered Colorado,
  Following still the barren plain
Where for months the mocking heavens
  Never spared a drop of rain,
Faithful Simon, weak and starving,
  Following feebly in the track
Pulled upon his straining halter,
  Groaned and fell beneath his pack.

23

Vain were all the kind entreaties,
  Vain the simple nursing done
To relieve his palsied weakness —
  Poor old Simon's course was run.
Billy spent the night beside him,
  But with next day's early dawn,
With the east's first flush of scarlet,
  Simon's faithful soul passed on.

Then, with hands outstretched before him,
  Half remembering what was said
When a child he saw the sexton
  Sprinkle earth upon the dead —
"Dust to dust, and then to ashes —
  I forget the other part —
I can't say the words I want to,
  I can't think — all's in my heart.

24

"Over twenty years, old pardner,
  We have been companions true;
You have always kept your end up
  In the hardships we've gone through.
If we'd stayed, and I had never
  Seen her face or touched her hand,
We should still have been contented,
  On our little piece of land.
This strange spell won't let me falter,
  Though the chasing never ends;
Seems that nothing ever'll stop it,
  Sickness, death, or loss of friends.
Where this love will drive a fellow,
  I ain't wise enough to tell;
Sometimes think it leads to heaven
  By a trail that runs through hell."

25

Weeks thereafter, pushing northward
  Crossing over Lodge Pole creek,
Threading Colorado's stretches —
  Sandy deserts wild and bleak —
Where the sun wars on the living,
  Struggling 'neath his blinding light,
Then resigns his work of ravage
  To the chilling frosts of night;
Where the bleaching bones of horses
  Here and there bestrew the plains,
Telling many a ghastly story
  Of misguided settlers' trains —
Where the early frontier ranger
  Marked the first trail to Cheyenne,
Billy, following its wand'rings,
  Found the missing mark again.

26

Then the labored pace grew faster
  As he passed each camping place,
Marking well the lessening distance
  In the long-contested race.
Riding through Wyoming's foothills,
  With their rugged summit lines
Stretched across the clear horizon,
  Fringed with pointed spruce and pines,

He beheld, one early morning,
  Rising slowly to the sky,
Smoke — the thin and gauzy column
  Of a camp fire built close by;
And, on looking down the valley
  With exultant, ringing cheer,
He beheld the prairie schooner
  And the MacIntyres near.

27

On an open spot of grass land
  Gilded by the rising sun,
Sloping sharply to the crevice
  Where the mountain waters run,
Ike, reclining, watched the horses,
  Now increased to quite a band,
While above him, in the timber,
  Brother Bill, with gun in hand,
Held it poised in sudden wonder,
  Half in attitude to shoot,
As he saw the coming rider,
  Heard his loudly yelled salute.
Near an old abandoned cabin,
  Huddled by the breakfast fire,
Resting calm in fancied safety
  Sat the elder MacIntyre.

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

" Resting calm in fancied safety
Sat the elder MacIntyre."

28

"You! Why, Billy, where d'you come from?
  What new game you playing now?
If you're out on posse business
  By the gods, jest start your row!
What you saying? You are friendly?
  Wal, I'm glad to hear it's so;
And I s'pose you made the journey
  Way out here to let me know!
Oh! you're talking 'bout our Nancy!
  Now I just begin to see.
Set down, Billy; you are askin'
  Something that sure puzzles me.
Nancy ain't like other women —
  What I say may hit you queer,
But it's jest as well to tell you —
  That there girl — she isn't here.

29

"Don't stampede your words, now, Billy.
  Slow 'em down and let 'em walk.
Lord a'mighty, man! keep quiet!
  Never heard such crazy talk!
Where's the girl? Wal, let me tell you —
  T'aint no use to take on so —
Where is Nancy? P'r'haps in heaven;
  I can't tell yer,— I don't know.

When we left last spring from Kansas,
  Travelin' mostly in the night,
We was chased up by a posse;
  Fourth day out we had a fight.
We had jest unhitched the hosses,
  Making camp at Old Man's Creek —
Gimme some o' that tobacker,
  I've been out for more'n a week.

30

"We had jest unhitched the hosses,
  Nance was riding Kelly's mare,
When we heard them all a-comin' —
  They had seen us pull in there.
Nancy said, 'I'll hold 'em, daddie,
  Get the outfit over here,
And I'll trail you in the mornin';
  I will see they don't get near.'
It was in that heavy timber —
  Growing dark and spittin' rain —
Where the creek runs to the eastward,
  Makes that loop, and back again.
We was in a reg'lar pocket;
  Creek banks made a kind of bluff
All around us, so it looked like
  We was trapped there, sure enough.

31

'Wal, we had a time in movin';
  Things got mixed up in the rush;
Lead team broke a piece of harness
  Pulling through the underbrush.
Then the wagon turned clean over,
  But we drug her plumb across,
Hitched with ropes and other fixin's,
  Usin' every extra hoss.
Wal, you never heard such shootin',
  Bullets whizzin' everywhere;
Pumped 'em on us till it sounded
  Like they had an army there.
Nancy stayed and cracked it to 'em,
  Kind o' circlin' round and round;
I could tell the two six-shooters
  She was usin', by the sound.

32

'You can bet we did some trav'lin'
  All that night and all next day;
I could still a-hear the shootin'
  After we was miles away.
I supposed we'd see the girl come
  Ridin' up to us 'fore long,
That is — I was jest a-thinkin'—
  If there wasn't somethin' wrong.

But, in spite of all our lookin',
  Sometimes slackin' up our gait,
Always thinkin' we should see her
  Every time we'd stop and wait —
We have never seen her, Billy,
  And I own I'm balked a bit,
Fur I know that she's a critter
  Made of nothin' else but grit.

33

"I wish *I*, could go and find her,
  But 'twould be too hot for me;
Long before I got back that fur
  I'd be strung up to a tree.
So I've been a kind o' thinkin',
  Since I see what's both'rin' you,
'Bout a thing — I hate to ask it —
  That I'd like for you to do.
I don't think that girl has ever —
  It sure hurts me, what I say —
But I'm sure that in the scrimmage
  Nancy never got away.
Billy, you go back and find her;
  You are all I've got to send;
You can sort o' fix things decent,
  Where she is — in Old Man's Bend."

THE RETURN

I

Every life is but a journey —
  Trav'ling on from place to place,
Starting from the point God gave us
  With an ever-varying pace,
Outward, onward, spurred by motives
  In our wanderings here and there,
Often led by hope alluring,
  Sometimes halted by despair;
But the life that travels farthest
  On that deeper strength depends,
For with love, there is no turning;
  When love dies the journey ends.

2

Back across the broken foothills,
  With a courage none can feel
Till the burning pangs of sorrow
  Turn the heart-strings into steel;
Back across the winter's playground,
  Tracing out the paths he trod,
With each muttered execration
  Ending in a prayer to God;

Blasts that howled with fiendish laughter,
  By their loud derisive cry
Seemed to mock his labored progress
  As they passed him swiftly by;
And the blizzard-driven snowflakes
  Into ghost-like fancies whirled,
Painted on the barren canvas,
  Gaunt Death battling for the world.

3

Back across the snow-strewn desert,
  Fighting famine face to face,
Trusting to his horse to take him
  To each former camping place.
Once Zeb stopped beside a snowdrift
  With a loud and startling neigh;
Tried to tell his half-dazed master
  Where his mate, old Simon, lay.
Pressing on, he reached the border
  Of Nebraska's whitened plain,
Where his mind in maudlin fancies
  Yielded to the bitter strain,
As he saw far in the distance,
  Like a battered mast at sea,
Once again the twisted branches
  Of the lone and friendly tree.

" Once again the twisted branches
Of the lone and friendly tree."

4

"Git up, Zeb. Come, see! She's waving!
  Waving there for you and me.
See her there, so white and pretty,
  Standing by our friend, the tree!
Quit that stumbling! Now then, streak it!
  Hit the gait you used to do
When we hired out for the round up
  And you beat the first one through.
There she is! There's where I saw her
  When we stayed there all that night;
Though 'twas dark, I saw her riding,
  By those flashing threads of light;
She's been waiting! Oh, I left her
  In this awful lonely place!
God forgive me! Nancy! hear me!
  Oh, that face — that poor white face!"

5

One cold morning, old Zach Baxter,
  Riding o'er this snowbound sea
Saw a famished pony standing
  Near a queer and lonely tree.
From his frost-encrusted nostrils
  Came a plaintive whinny, low,
As the man rode up beside him
  Struggling through the drifted snow.

When the old man tried to lead him,
  He refused to turn away;
But he pawed the drift beneath him,
  Where his stricken master lay,
And below the cold, white cover,
  In a deathlike stupor deep,
Old Zach found a sorry stranger
  Shrouded for his last long sleep.

6

Tearing at the ragged bundle
  Lodged between the horse's feet,
Clutching at the frozen blanket,
  Brushing back the crusted sleet,
Faithful in his rude endeavors,
  Rousing by his loud commands,
Roughly shaking, turning, rubbing,
  Zach breathed on his face and hands,
Till the stiffened limbs responded
  And the closed eyes opened wide,
Dazed and puzzled at the stranger
  Working fiercely at his side.
Billy felt the strong arms raise him,
  Felt the Frost King's stinging breath
As he struggled, half unconscious,
  In the wav'ring fight with death.

7

In the east, the sun dogs glistened
  Like tall shafts of marble, bright,
O'er the whitened grave of nature,
  Ghostly spires of frozen light;
Flying frost flakes snapping, sparkling,
  Dancing in a wild display,
Turned into a mist of diamonds
  As they mocked the newborn day.

8

Old Zach's pony bearing double,
  Reeking steam from every pore,
Reached at last the covered pathway
  Leading to the dug-out door.
With his arms clasped tight round Billy,
  Zach half dragged his helpless load
Through the lowly, mud-walled entrance
  Of his rudely built abode.
There, upon the narrow bunk bed
  Spread with nondescript attire,
Old Zach left him rolled in blankets
  While he started up a fire;
And no nurse, with special training
  And a medical degree,
Ever gave more loyal service
  To a patient, than did he.

9

Poor and meager were the comforts
  Of Zach's cave-like prairie home,
Pungent with the gruesome odor
  Of the fresh-dug virgin loam.
Filmy wreaths of smoke ascending,
  Which the prairie fairies wove
Floated to the dried grass ceiling
  From a cracked and rusty stove.
Willow poles athwart for rafters
  Sagged beneath the dirt roof's strain,
And a piece of grease-smeared paper
  Formed the only window-pane.
In the center, on the dirt floor
  Stood a table-like affair
Fashioned from a wagon end-gate,
  Where Zach spread his scanty fare.

10

Here for weeks lay Billy, helpless,
  Racked with maddening fever pains,
As the burning sun of summer
  Scorches sere the desert plains.
Then he lay with cold, white features
  And the feeble, scarce drawn breath,
As the silent winter prairie
  Lies beneath its shroud of death.

Oftimes when the raging sickness
  Sent the hot blood to his brain,
He would point with frantic gesture
  To the dingy window pane,
Calling in excited mutterings,
  Eyes transfixed in frenzied fright —
"There she is! Now, can't you see her?
  See her face there in the light!"

II

Then old Zach would try to soothe him
  In his simple-hearted way;
"She won't hurt you," he would tell him,
  "I'll go drive her clear away.
I've seen things — now listen, pardner —
  These things happened once to me
Once down there in old Dodge City,
  Winding up a three weeks' spree.
What you see is jest a 'lusion,
  'Cause you're crazy in your head;
When your thinker's runnin' proper
  You'll find 'She' is gone or dead.
There, now, pardner, see what this is!
  Ain't it purty? Your tin cup;
Found a little pinch o' coffee.
  That's the boy, now, drink it up!"

12

When the breeze of spring in whispers
  Stirred the withered bunch-grass plume,
Humming hymns of resurrection
  Over nature's silent tomb,
And the fleeing clouds of heaven,
  Bending low at God's command,
Spilled their tribute from the ocean
  On the long-forsaken land,
And the sun, with mellow kindness
  Spread abroad his softened rays,
With his magic power throbbing
  Through the heart of lengthening days,
Billy heard, at last, the music
  Of the glad earth's jubilee,
Felt a new strength stir within him,
  And a longing to be free.

13

One day, o'er the hill's low summit,
  Whence the prairie dipped away,
There appeared a moving wagon
  With its canvas patched and gray,
Like a vessel on the ocean
  Under taut and close-reefed sail,
Rising slowly on the billows
  Heaped up by the driving gale.

Veering towards the little dug-out,
  Making for a friendly shore,
Heaving to, the schooner anchored
  Close beside the open door.
Loud and hearty were the greetings,
  For the voyager who came
Was Tom Frothingham, a neighbor,
  Who had lived near Billy's claim.

14

Bit by bit he told the story —
  How he'd wandered all around
Since he left his Kansas homestead
  And the folks near North Pole mound;
How he'd traveled all through Texas
  With the roving fever on,
Camping oft in strange new places,
  Where no other soul had gone.
So the news, now half forgotten
  In his absence from the place,
Came in broken recollections —
  Careful efforts to retrace
All the incidents of interest
  To the sick one listening there,
Who, with pale and careworn features,
  Heard the story with despair.

15

"Three weeks after you left Kansas
  I hitched up and came away.
Still, I reckoned you intended
  To improve your claim and stay;
For your eighty was a picture —
  Running spring and good clear land —
Everything a body needed
  For a starter, right at hand.
Well, some others left 'fore I did —
  You remember Mac, of course,
How he got the moving notion
  When Bill Kelly missed his horse?
Chased him clear to Old Man's crossing,
  So I heard the posse say;
Thought they had him fairly cornered,
  But, by jings! he got away.

16

"There are stranger things than fiction;
  What is natural may seem queer,
So I s'pose we needn't wonder
  At the things we see out here.
One thing happened since you left there
  That I call a burning shame —
Did you know that rope-necked Johnson
  Jumped your eighty-acre claim?

Last I saw him, he was plowing,
  And he laughed and tried to joke:
Said 'twas kind of you to leave him
  All the ground that you had broke;
Said your house was so untidy
  He was sleeping out of doors,
Till he got a girl to help him
  Wash the pans and scrub the floors.

17

"Lots of people coming in there
  From most every foreign land —
Massachusetts and Missouri —
  Made a mess I couldn't stand.
Every man that's made of manhood
  Wants to live where he is free,
So I'm bound to keep on moving
  When they get to crowding me.
Then another thing that happened:
  Puzzled every one around
When they heard one morning early,
  That Bill Kelly's horse was found.
Aleck Rose told me about it
  After I had packed and gone;
Said the mare strayed in the dooryard
  With Mac's steel-horn saddle on."

18

As each day in steady conquest
  Pressed the ranks of fleeing night,
Winning back the stolen hours
  With their golden spears of light;
As the living in all nature
  Felt the mighty spirit's sway,
So the sick man caught its power
  And his illness wore away.
One clear morning as the gray dawn
  Silver-tinted all the plain,
In his weatherbeaten saddle
  Billy took the trail again.
"Good bye, boy," old Zach repeated,
  " I'm most sure you'll never see
Any more o' them 'ere 'lusions,
  Anyway, what you called ' She.' "

19

Day by day the low horizon
  Spread its narrow circle round,
As if fate had drawn a barrier,
  And forbade advance beyond.
Though the journey dragged on slowly,
  Night time brought its sure reward,
For the added miles behind him
  Stretched at length to Mingo's Ford,

Where the breeze bore from the upland
  Broken fragments of the song
Of the cowboy with his cattle,
  As he drove the strays along;
Where the voice of flowing water
  And the treble of the birds,
Swelled the hallowed evening anthem
  To the bass of lowing herds.

20

Then the trail along the Solomon
  Where the timber, making friends
With the ever-widening valley,
  Filled the rounded river bends;
Then the rankling recollection,
  As he passed some well-known place
Where before, with hope and vigor,
  He had sped in fruitless chase.
Then the lonely camp at nightfall,
  Where the wind in monotone
Thrummed the harp strings of the grass stems,
  Breathing low its song, "Alone!"
Where the stars, fixed in the heavens,
  To his upturned face would say,
With their heartless glint of distance,
  "She thou seek'st is far away."

21

Then the long, far-reaching bottoms
  Rank with withered blue-joint grass,
With its broken stems entangled
  In a matted jungle mass;
Then across the higher prairie,
  Searching out a shorter way,
To the creek that joined the river
  Where Mac crossed and got away;
Then the twinge of bitter sorrow
  As he neared his journey's end,
And beheld the fringe of timber
  On the banks of Old Man's bend,
Where no living sign or token
  Broke the gloom that brooded there,
Save a solitary buzzard
  Floating idly in the air.

22

From these high and broken hilltops
  He could trace the river's flow,
And the creek's untamed meandering,
  With its looplike bend below,
Seeming in the light of evening
  Like a giant serpent there,
Which had coiled about its victim,
  And lay resting in its lair.

Breaking through the tangled brushwood
  At the sinking of the sun,
Creeping down the steep embankment
  Where the muddy waters run,
Billy crossed within the timber
  Where a shroud of deeper gloom,
With its chill of death and darkness
  Marked the hidden prairie tomb.

23

As the soul in deep communion,
  Seeks some isolated bower
Where the body's sordid cravings
  Yield beneath the spirit's power,
So the searcher, bowed in reverence,
  Left untouched his evening fare
As he listened to the voices
  Of the shadows gathering there.
Here no lighted torch or camp fire
  With its weak and fitful ray,
Could illume the mystic journey
  Of prayer's consecrated way.
Here the silence brought its message
  Of forebodings, vague and deep,
In its visions to the dreamer,
  Through the mystery of sleep.

24

In his dreams he saw a monarch
  Decked in sumptuous array,
Seated on a throne of glory,
  Bearing royal title, Day.
Then some mighty power transcendent,
  Thrust him from his gorgeous throne,
Turning all the realm to darkness,
  And the world was left alone.
As the shades of gloom were spreading,
  By strange flashing threads of light
He beheld in dim-drawn outline,
  On the background of the night,
Phantom horse and girlish rider,
  Speeding on in reckless race,
Till she turned directly toward him
  And he saw Her fearless face.

25

Then, behold! the King returning
  With a pageantry so bright,
That the shadow-clad usurpers
  Fled in ignominious fright.
As he saw the hosts approaching
  Through a cloud of battle smoke,
Charging wildly down upon him,
He, in sudden fear, awoke.

As he looked, the blackened heavens
  Splashed with demon-tinted blood
From the hue of burning prairie
  Throbbed above the fiery flood.
Leaping o'er the rounded bluff-tops,
  Down the valley's long incline,
He could see the lurid column
  Spread its blazing battle line.

26

Like a troop of charging horsemen
  Sweeping on with maddened roar,
Mowing down the grass battalions,
  Crackling flames swept all before.
Then the driftwood's rifted breastwork,
  Left there by the waters high,
Flashed up in a hissing furnace,
  As the red-armed fiends leaped by.
Clinging to the swaying saddle
  And the plunging horse's mane,
Billy dashed through falling embers
  To the level, open plain.
On the right and left, the head fires
  Rushing on at furious pace,
Stretched beside the horse and rider
  In the life-and-death-fought race.

27

Here the gales with venomed fury
  Met in vortex from afar,
Raising high the flaming pennons
  Of the fiery fiends of war.
Flashing by, the blazing grass stems
  Sped like arrows through the air,
Falling on the distant prairie,
  Kindling fresh fires everywhere.
Pressing through the low-flung smoke clouds—
  Stifling fumes of Hades' breath —
Fiercer with each flying moment
  Drove those scorching blasts of death.
Thrice his horse, 'neath quirt and rowel
  Bravely struggling, almost fell,
As he fled in desperation
  O'er the trail that led through hell.

28

One poor singed and panting coyote
  Through the perils of the ride
Hemmed in by the flames pursuing
  Ran close by the horse's side.
Scarce a meager pace behind them,
  Pressing hard the coyote's rear,
Raced a frantic old jack rabbit,
  Ears laid low in speed and fear.

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"Fiercer with each flying moment
Drove those scorching blasts of death."

Reaching now a stretch of upland,
  Here the coyote changed his course,
Breaking through the narrow side-fire,
  Followed fast by hare and horse;
And, upon the smoking prairie
  Over which the fire had passed,
Steaming horse and stricken rider
  Found a breathing space at last.

29

When the morning sun in splendor
  Rose upon the blackened plain,
His red beams revealed the lover
  Back at Old Man's Bend again.
Waist deep in its soothing waters
  Bathing blistered brow and hands,
While near by, in pain a-tremble,
  Faithful Zeb impatient stands.
Through the bend he searched and wandered,
  But except the furrowed bark,
Of a gnarled and aged elm tree
  Which revealed one bullet-mark,
Naught was left save blackened embers;
  And the words he "knew in part" —
"Dust to dust and then to ashes"—
  Told the story of his heart.

30

Back along the Solomon River,
  Trailing towards the humble claim
He had lost when love and duty
  Fired his soul to "being game";
Back, across the beaver fordway,
  Where love first had found the track,
Now returning with the rankling
  Sting of hate to bring him back —
Hate, that sorrow made more bitter
  When the last vague hope had fled
Like the smoke which left behind it
  Scattered ashes of the dead;
Back, where once the flower-decked prairie,
  Spread its bloom of hope and bliss,
Now a blackened field of mourning,
  From the fire of one sweet kiss.

31

Till one day, he saw beyond him,
  In the distance, purple crowned,
That old monarch of the prairie,
  Guard of ages, North Pole Mound.
Then the field where Zeb and Simon
  Pulled the old sod-breaking plow
Stretching like a narrow ribbon
  On the land that lay below.

Now the horse's steps grew lighter
  As he passed each well-known sign
Of the old familiar landscape,
  And they crossed the eighty's line,
Where the spring of running waters
  Gave envenomed purpose birth,
As he drank its bubbling offering
  From the pulsing heart of earth.

32

Riding then up from the hollow,
  Full before his eyes appeared
Home — his home — the low-walled sodhouse
  Which his toiling hands had reared.
Near the straw shed stood the wagon
  He had brought from Wichita,
And beneath the grass-fringed gable
  Hung his rusty crosscut saw.
In the dooryard, near the window,
  Lay the broken homemade chair,
Where, at evening, love-born fancies
  Revelled, as he rested there;
Love, whose scattered seed had fallen
  On a mystic field of fate,
Where the tangled vine extending
  Bore the bitter fruit of hate.

33

Hurrying nearer, he dismounted,
  Trembling with the rage he felt,
As he cast the reins before him
  And drew taut his cartridge belt,
Throwing down his torn sombréro,
  There, before the tight-closed door,
On the cowardly usurper
  Loud and bitter vengeance swore.
" Come, you dirty, green-scummed scoundrel,
  With your sneaking 'plan or two'!
Just come out, you rope-necked buzzard!
  See how far you'll put them through.
You can keep the eighty acres,
  While hell writes your pedigree,
But I'll rub your crooked nose-piece
  In the dirt you stole from me.

34

" Come outside, you sneaking coyote!
  If you've got a drop of man
In your greasy, thieving carcass,
  Finish up what you began."
Fiercer grew his coarse invective,
  Louder yet his taunting calls,
When no answer to his challenge
  Came from out the low sod walls.

Uncontrolled, his furious anger
  Spoke in quick and murderous roar
As he pumped his old six-shooter
  Through the barred and bolted door.
When he paused the rude door opened,
  And before its splintered place
Stood the vision of the shadows,
  And he saw Her fearless face.

35

As the artist in his painting
  Plans the background to enhance
All the beauty of his subject
  Both in pose and countenance,
So the poor and dark interior
  Lent its gloom to magnify
All the power and witching beauty
  Of her face and lustrous eye.
Standing there, a pictured goddess
  Sketched against a lowering storm,
Bearing on her pallid features
  That supernal gift of calm.

36

"Nancy! Woman! God in heaven,
  Speak, girl! Can this thing be true?
Are you here with that — that scoundrel,
  After all that I've gone through?
Do you stand there, fiend or human,
  After lending him your hand,
First to break an honest spirit,
  Then to steal away my land?
Must a man who loves a woman
  Like a devil's imp be driven
Through the tortures of damnation
  For a single glimpse of heaven?
Tell me where the cur is hiding —
  I've no wish to hurt his bride,
But I'll braid a twelve-foot bull whip
  From his dirty, yaller hide!

37

"Speak to me and tell me, woman,
  How the God in heaven above
Starts the fires of hell a-burning
  From a spark of human love;
Why He ever made a woman
  Who could play a fickle part;
Why He ever made a fellow
  With his soul tied to his heart;

"Standing there, a pictured goddess
Sketched against a lowering storm."

Why He made life just a gamble —
  I can't talk the way I feel —
In the game that I've been playing,
  You know this ain't no square deal!
I will go away and leave you,
  But 'twould kind o' ease the pain
If you'd only tell me, Nancy —
  If you'd try — to — just explain.

38

"If you wouldn't stand there looking
  With a face of livid white
Like the specter of the prairie
  That I saw one horrid night,
Riding through the endless darkness
  Like a being doomed from birth
Just to roam outside of heaven
  And denied a place on earth.
Say one word to me! Speak, Nancy,
  If you have a voice and live!
Tell the worst, e'en though you ask me
  To be patient and forgive.
I will listen — I will suffer —
  I will do the best I can;
Nancy, sweetheart! hear the pleading
  Of a broken-hearted man."

39

"See here, Billy! You gone crazy?
  Charging like you got a fit?
Johnson ain't in — just at present —
  Won't you stop and rest a bit?
Don't act strange. There's no hard feelings,
  Though I've never seen before
Any man that knocked like you did
  On a peaceful neighbor's door.
Come right in; now, don't be backward,
  Like old times to have *you* 'round!
You look tired, like you'd traveled
  Over quite a stretch of ground.
Sit right here in this old rocker;
  Johnson fixed it up one day,
Feeling certain you would never
  Come meandering 'round this way.

40

"Don't get up and act uneasy,
  Rest yourself, now, if you can,
You don't mind me like Jim Johnson —
  He's a most obedient man.
You went off and left your eighty,
  Roaming where the luck-wind blows,
Like a tumbleweed in winter,
  Where you've been, Lord only knows.

"While Jim's gone we'll talk together,
As we used to, months ago,
When I tried to quench the burning
Of a love I didn't know.
Listen, Billy, while I tell you
All about my 'fickle part';
When I'm done you may know better
How God made a woman's heart.

41

"While you're resting, I'll get supper,
Though there ain't much here to eat,
'Cepting bran, to make some muffins,
And a little rabbit meat.
Wish I had that bit of coffee
I saved up for — oh, so long,
Till one day I went and used it,
Though I somehow felt 'twas wrong;
For I kind o' thought that sometime
Some one might be coming here
Worn out with a long, long journey,
And would crave that kind o' cheer.
Now, then, Billy, draw your stool up;
What we've got is scant and plain —
I ain't hungry — honest — Billy,
While you eat — why — I'll 'explain.'"

NANCY'S STORY

1

"I went off and left you, Billy,
  'Cause I'm used to being free,
And I love my dear old daddie—
  He has been so good to me.
Ever since I learned to toddle
  We've been living on the run,
And my first and only playthings
  Were a saddle and a gun.
When I went away with daddie,
  After trav'ling nigh a week,
We were caught up by the posse
  In the bend on Old Man's Creek.
Think I'd let them take my daddie?
  No: I held them all at bay,
While the boys hitched up the horses,
  Crossed the creek and got away.

2

"I just told them I would follow
  After all the fuss was through,
But instead, that night I wandered,
  Thinking all the time of you;
For when we were last together
  You cast over me a spell
That just seemed to change my nature,
  In a way that words can't tell;

For it left a fire a-burning
  Like a live and glowing coal,
That blazed up into a longing,
  Till I craved with all my soul
To be back, somehow, where you were,
  And to hear you tell once more
That you loved me. That man-story
  I had never heard before.

3

"Then I trailed back o'er the prairie,
  Riding steady every night,
Picking out the wildest country
  With my luck to guide me right.
When I'd see the hungry morning
  Eat the stars up in the East,
I would hide in gulch or timber
  Like a wild and hunted beast.
How I learned to love the darkness
  As it spread its mighty arm,
Close around me, like a lover,
  Fondly shielding me from harm!
And I knew the sweet caresses
  Of the earth and sky above,
As the night's mysterious voices
  Soothed me with their tale of love.

4

"Then I'd ride like forty devils
  Just to catch upon my face
All the kisses which the tempest
  Pressed upon me in the race.
How I thought of poor old daddie,
  Whom, perhaps, I'd see no more
If I went clear back to your place,
  While he hurried on before!
I could hardly bear the burden
  When I'd think of — both of you;
But that fire you set a-burning,
  One night told me what to do —
I would see and ask you, Billy,
  If you wouldn't go with me
Where we both could be with daddie,
  Way out West, where he must be.

5

"Then at last the night that loved me,
  Turned its pent-up furies loose,
Roaring out on me its anger
  And unpitying abuse.
How the rain beat down upon me!
  How the lightning burned its track
Through the clouds of storm and thunder
  As I reached your sod-walled shack!

All was dark within, and quiet,
When I rapped upon the door.
Then I saw the flash of matches
And the lamplight on the floor;
Heard you stomp your heavy boots on,
Heard you walk and draw the bar,
But the door, when thrown wide open,
Showed Jim Johnson standing thar.

6

" 'What you doing here?' I shouted,
When I saw his hateful leer;
'Tell me what this means, Jim Johnson.
Where is Billy? Ain't he here?'
He was standing on the doorstep,
And the light that shone within
Seemed to twist his wrinkled features
In a sort of wonder-grin.
'Well! well! Nancy! sure's I'm livin'!
Out there in the pouring wet!
Sure I'll care for you, Miss Nancy,
I'll protect you, don't you fret!
I'm a friend that you can count on,
Does me good to see your face!
Come in, gal, and dry your garments,
You have struck the very place!'

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7

"You don't blame me, do you, Billy,
  If I did go in and stay,
Warming by your stove and fire,
  Just to hear what he would say?
I will try to tell his story
  As he told it, if I can,
Putting in what I remember
  Of his 'interesting plan.'
'Now, then, gal, I heard you calling
  As you stood there in the dark,
On a fellow, named Bill Truly,
  But you shot 'way off the mark.
Billy ain't here now, and further,
  He won't be here you can bet;
Anyhow, that's what he told me
  Two weeks past, when we last met.

8

"'When your folks all skipped the country
  I decided I'd move, too;
Thought perhaps you'd get in trouble
  And I'd try to help you through;
So I got beyond the posse,
  Rode like fire upon your track,
Found your dad, and *you* not with him,
  So I turned and came right back.

Riding home along the Solomon,—
  It's the truth as sure's the Lord —
I met Billy with his horses
  Three miles east of Mingo's Ford.
Stopped and shook my hand and told me
  He was so far on his way
To a ranch 'way up in Utah,
  Where he'd made his plans to stay.

9

" 'Said he wanted to be friendly,
  So the things that he had left,
If I cherished no hard feelings,
  I could look on as his gift.
" If you come across Miss Nancy
  You can say to her for me,
That I've got another sweetheart,
  And that she is wholly free."
Billy'll never do to tie to —
  He's too fickle, gal, for you —
So I just propose to offer
  You a man that will stay true.
I have worked it out, Miss Nancy —
  It's the problem of my life;
I have planned that you shall stay here
  As my own dear little wife.'

10

"'Look here, Johnson! You're a liar,
  When you say he's set me free!
When you met him there at Mingo's
  He had gone to hunt for me.
Don't you dare to touch me, scoundrel!
  Don't you dare to slur his name!
You're a cur — a thief — Jim Johnson!
  You have jumped my sweetheart's claim.
Don't you dare to venture near me!
  Or you'll wish you'd not begun.
All your schemes and double dealings,
  All your hatched-up plans are done.
You start now and pack your fixin's!
  Don't you leave the smallest bit!
Every filthy thing you own here,
  Pack it up — you dog, and *git!*'

11

"He was standing there uncertain,
  And I felt to clinch his throat;
  But, instead, I shot — to scare him —
  All the buttons off his coat.
Then I pumped two in the corner,
  Where he'd sunk down on his knees —
Slit his ear and cut his collar,
  Never listening to his pleas.

Told him if he didn't mosey
  I would plant his carcass whole,
In a grave I'd dig that evening
  On the eighty he had stole.
Then he promised, but I chased him
  'Way across the old Saline,
And so far as I have knowledge,
  He has never since been seen.

12

"When I got back here 'fore morning,
  Thought of having Kelly's mare,
So I rode her to his stable
  And I left her standing there.
For I knew that you'd consider
  Twas the proper thing to do,
If you came back here and found me
  Holding down your claim for you.
But I felt right sorry, Billy,
  When I looked around next day,
In the box there in the corner
  Where the pans and dishes lay;
For in fixing for my breakfast,
  My! the crockery was slim!
More than half of it was busted
  By the bullets fired at Jim:

"But, instead, I shot, to scare him,
All the buttons off his coat."

13

"I forgot to tell you, Billy,
  That for thirteen months or more,
You're the only man that's ever
  Crossed the threshold of that door.
I have stayed alone and waited,
  Full of faith that you would come,
So that I — might go to daddie,
  And that you'd — have back your home.
Though perhaps I've sometimes suffered
  From the cold and from the heat,
And I've gone for days together,
  Here, without a bite to eat,
'Twasn't hunger of the body
  That I craved to satisfy,
I was starved for — you — and daddie,
  As the weary weeks trailed by.

14

"How I tried to think and reason
  Why the fire from one caress
Turned my burning, yearning spirit
  To a cinder of distress.
Some one told me, I remember,
  Long ago when I was small,
God made every star up yonder,
  Everything — the world and all.

Then I thought that in His workshop,
  Up there in the heavens above,
He had made that curious hunger
  Of the heart that we call love.
P'r'aps my troubles and the waiting
  Stirred me to this queer-like whim;
But I couldn't help it, Billy,
  I just had to talk to Him.

15

"In the night, when God wa'n't busy
  And could hear the slightest sound,
I would venture from my hiding
  To the top of North Pole Mound.
I was sure He'd never let His
  Angels come out this-a-way,
But would use the wind to carry,
  Prayers out here, that people pray.
So I'd hold my hands, and stopping
  Gusts that tried to struggle free,
Tell them this here simple message
  They must take to you from me:
'Please, dear God, won't you tell Billy
  That I'm holding down his claim?
He don't come 'cause he's in trouble.
  Thank you, God. He ain't to blame.'"

16

Long before her honest story
  Faltered to its hallowed close,
Pushing back his untouched supper,
  Tremblingly her guest arose.
Vain for him to curb emotion,
  Or to stammer out his praise
Through a storm of rude devotion,
  Cast in halting human phrase.
Vain for him to frame a message
  Never meant for words to tell,
At the joy of reaching heaven
  By that trail that led through hell.
But his fervent benediction
  Was a passionate embrace,
And the Amen, love's own ending,
  As he kissed her fearless face.

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